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ABSTRACT

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers an existential phenomenological interpretation of subjectivity and the shared world. He offers a perceptually based philosophy which can be mined for implications and interpretations for a new style of teaching relevant to the contemporary social and educational scene. This paper analyzes Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of subjectivity for its implications for a new style of teaching. The discussion explores the concepts of primordial unity, the significance of perception, the place of the self, the body, the dialectic of subject and other(s), and the relatedness of subject and object. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the socio-cultural world imbued with both ambiguity and contingency and energized with freedom is included. Implications for teaching style are discussed. (JD)

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Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy:
Implications for a New Style of Teaching:
Focus on Intersubjectivity

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Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy:

Implications for a New Style of Teaching:

Focus on Intersubjectivity

Merleau-Ponty's rich and complex philosophy offers an existential phenomenological interpretation of subjectivity and the shared world. Studied by academic philosophers, he is receiving increasing attention from educational philosophers. He offers a perceptually based philosophy which can be mined for implications and interpretations for a new style of teaching relevant to the contemporary social and educational scene. Because of the limits of the paper, only Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of intersubjectivity will be analyzed for its implications for a new style of teaching. His philosophy provides many conceptual avenues for analysis and evaluation.

Intersubjectivity includes several concepts. The discussion will explore the concepts of primordial unity, the significance of perception, the place of the self, the body, the dialectic of subject and other(s), and the relatedness of subject and object. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the socio-cultural world imbued with both ambiguity and contingency and energized with freedom will be included. Implications

for teaching style will be tendered as the discussion progresses. Summary/conclusions will close the paper.

Intersubjectivity/Unity

Intersubjectivity, the interconnectedness of selves, is stressed in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. In Signs, he holds, "Our traces mix and intermingle. They make a single wake of our public durations."[1] In his study of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Schmidt holds intersubjectivity is more than a plurality of individuals. It is an interconnection in which each is mutually implicated with the other.[2] Rabil catches the same theme when he declares, "Every human project reveals intersubjectivity."[3]

A teaching style reflecting the intersubjective theme focuses on an environment and strategies encouraging mutual appreciation and support. The goals of the teacher would include growth of learners both as individuals and as members of a community of learning. Cooperation but not compliance would characterize such learners. Self-propelled but not selfishly competitive learners relate to strategies combining individualized as well as team and group activities. A classroom environment of mutual trust and respect stimulates the initial phase of understanding one's involvement in the human dilemma. Bound to one another and linked to their culture, students could someday perceive the intersubjectivity of the human condition, their oneness with all humankind.

Perception

A phenomenological approach, which begins with perception and links each to the other, is an important aspect in appreciating intersubjec-

tive linkage with all. In The Visible and the Invisible Merleau-Ponty describes human involvement in the world:

> The involvement of men in the world and of men in one another, even if it can only be brought about only by means of perceptions and acts, is transversal with respect to the spatial and temporal multiplicity of the actual . . . The openness upon a natural and historical world is not an illusion and is not an a priori: it is our involvement in Being.[4]

Perception taps into Being. Learning to be real needs teaching that encourages perceptual apprehension of the many-sidedness of objects, situations, and people's characters. Feeling and sensing in body-centered activities accompanied by reflection and dialogue create the background for an understanding of person and humanity existing in a concrete world. Hasty abstractions and cliches are avoided in a situation which propels the learner to heightened awareness, activity, and insight. Historic events and contemporary dilemmas are more keenly appreciated and understood if our connectedness to others is implemented through perceptually based learning.

The Body

We are perceiving, embodied beings. For Merleau-Ponty, the body, a multi-faceted entity, defines us and joins us to the world. The body, the subjectivity, is not an isolate who gains understanding by retreating within introspectively. Rather, one ventures out into the world of nature, society, and language to know oneself. We are

constantly expressing meaning through the body. In Merleau-Ponty's words, "our body is a grouping of lived through meanings which move toward its equilibrium."[5] Responsible and solitary, the self reaches out to others and discovers one's very corporeality an indissoluble link to them and the world. Attuned to others and naturally responsive, the subject comprehends and communicates understanding through gesture, glance, and word. One is implanted in the world by a "natal pact between our body and the world."[6] To become ourselves we must be in touch with the other.

An educator awakened to Merleau-Ponty's beliefs constructs an environment filled with communication possibilities. Word, gesture, movement, dance, rhythm, and silence all are body-centered channels of communication and relatedness. Each responds to the other in the shared space of the classroom and to the wider domain of humankind.

To be human is to recognize one's connection to others. It is a primordial response, a link to all humanity. The subject, product of culture and change agent, seeks self-identification and finds it in concert with others. Intersubjectivity represents the total response of individuals to a challenging and sometimes threatening world. To be the complete single one, the person recognizes the other as an extension of self. United with others, one is united in Being. The self is not absorbed or swamped by others but rather reaches humanhood in relating to others as a free being.

The subject integrates sensation and thought as well as meaning with desire in a schema of unfolding significance which appropriates the

world. Each, a unique self, apprehends the world somewhat differently and structures a learning style unique to her structure of behavior. A teaching style responsive to the special perspective of the one and the membership of each in the family of humankind balances plurality with singleness and freedom with responsibility. According to Mallin, motility, membership in the natural and social world, and cognitive-linguistic structures articulate our perceptual rootedness in Being.[7] Phenomenologically alert educators would use all those channels in encouraging complete learning experiences and holistic growth of each learner.

A teaching style resonant to the message in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy fosters engagement with the learning situation. Learner and material are personalized and individualized. Rather than a dichotomy there is a sense of unity between subjectivity and object of learning. The perceptual, intellectual, social, physical, intuitive, and emotional coalesce to construct a unique experience that strengthens self knowledge and a sense of common rooting in a shared culture. Literature, history, science, and art speak to and bind the self to a shared existence. Respondent and creator, the single one interrogates the world. The answer may come from a partner in class or from Plato. The learner is in a continual dialogue with the past and the present.

A supportive teaching style encourages the use of personalized questions, novel approaches, and many layered investigations. Implicit in the learner's engagement with the situation would be an avoidance of pat answers and check list surveys. With each experience in the shared

and primordial world of symbol and sound learnings are sedimented. The self learns and grows accumulating understanding and insight uniquely constructed but also general and shared with others. Interrogating the world, asking who am I, and what is my relationship to others, the self discovers the answer is reflected in the other's eyes. That other may be a partner in a game, a visitor from the other side of town, or a child in Cambodia. Each is a co-presence in humankind. Each reveals a sense of shared Being.

Involved in the world, we are part of it. The body is the vehicle through which we express our corporeality and our relatedness to others and objects. Rabil describes the body as "a being in two dimensions . . . one side . . . a thing among things, from the other the one who sees and touches them."[8] It is a project articulating Being. In Schmidt's description, "The body is the vehicle through which we have a world and the means by which we sanction communication with it."[9]

I-Other

The embodied subject in establishing its place in the world assumes a kind of generality. According to Mallin:

> It is not an 'I' which senses but a 'one'. Senses are universal to all subjects. It will reveal a subjectivity in general which gives us a glimpse of Being.[10]

Perception is the channel of relatedness. In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty describes perception as

> opaque, for it brings into play, beneath what I know, my sensory fields which are my primitive alliance with the world--because to be 'to be conscious' is here nothing but 'to belong to'. . . . It is by communicating with the world that we communicate beyond all doubt with ourselves.[11]

We communicate with the world and receive messages from it visually, tactily, aurally, and verbally. A style of teaching in consonance with Merleau-Ponty's theory encourages immersion in a learning encounter that is complete. It is not enough to play the spectator. One must be there in the encounter. Sharing in dance, poem, experiment, report, or play links the one with many in the continuing communication of artists, writers, creators, and philosophers. The present and the past are linked and direct one toward a future connected to both. The three spheres of time are shared with all.

Merleau-Ponty reminds us, "The normal subject would be the one who would not really consent to becoming himself except in contact with other people."[12] The individual constructs a life design in company with others. Through the chance melding of time and opportunity the self discovers the other and destiny. With confrontation, encounter, and friendship learners discover that both those who support and those who intimidate can challenge one to grow. The shared world with others is filled with emotional cross currents. Learners engaged in active debates, interviewing those of opposite political persuasions, or working with those who seem to lack appreciation for one's efforts create moments of challenge and stress. Learners need to cope with the

many perspectives of a shared human world. Commonality among people does not imply uniformity in goals, lifestyle, or beliefs.

With others, a society and culture are constructed. Much can be learned about humans and their shared world through analysis of the work in which they are engaged and the tools they use to accomplish their goals. Schmidt cites Merleau-Ponty's contention that the sociologist adopt a human attitude in studying a society. More than objective indices are needed to understand a people.[13] Merleau-Ponty indicates the way to know a given society:

> More surely than books or teachings, modes of work hand the previous generations' ways of being on to the new generations. It is true that in a given society at a given moment the way of working expresses the mental and moral structure just as a living body's slightest reflex expresses the total subject's fundamental way of being in the world. But economic life is at the same time the historical carrier of mental structures, just as our body maintains the basic features of our behavior beneath our varying moods . . . this is the reason one will more surely get to know the essence of a society by analyzing interpersonal relations as they have been fixed and generalized in economic life.[14]

Subject-Object

What is work, who should perform it, and how should it be rewarded are questions societies have grappled with. Their answers have defined both the workers and society. Workers using tools have become in some

situations workers as tools. Often categorized by their occupations, people have been placed in rigid social categories, either stigmatized or honored. Others have been excluded from some occupations because of their sex, racial, or ethnic background. Role taking based on research of historic record, art, music, and narrative position the learner in the place of those who long for work or who carry the burden of low esteem occupations. The dilemma of one who is deprived of work can be appreciated when interviewing the factory worker automated out of a job or the late middle-aged employee considered useless by management. Economics runs through all these situations. Capitalism's strengths and weaknesses are portrayed in novel, news report, and labor statistics. All need the human interpretation to be appreciated and felt. "What is the American Dream?" is a question students can ponder. The background and personal values of the respondent structure the answer. Learners appreciate the significance of personal perspective when they meet and mingle with persons of varying age, social class, and ethnic background. In considering Merleau-Ponty's perspective on history, Kwant observes:

> human beings in their co-existence, develop a common bodily being, consisting, e.g. of their common economic life, their forms of social behavior, their language, literature, juridical forms, villages, cities, forms of art . . . . Through it, co-existence is, of course oriented in a certain direction.[15]

Socio-cultural

Through the process of history, one is inextricably related to the other. The individual is absorbed into the social matrix. One's individual acts, though unique, reflect the projects of others. The question of who one is is found in the response of others within the structure of culture. "We are what others think of us."[16] We are not determined by others, but to achieve our place in a shared world, each contributes her co-presence to others. Member of many groups, the subject reveals facets of her personality within those associations. Reciprocally, the person contributes to and affects others in a continuing process which reaches back into the past and surges toward a dimly perceived future.

Often students regard themselves as creatures of the present. No ties to the past and relative disinterest in a future of responsibilities and consequences characterize their sense of a perpetual present. Educators sensitive to the relatedness of each to all temporally as well as spatially can engage the young in inquiry into contemporary social, political, and environmental questions which entail gathering historic data and some futuring. Singly, in pairs, and in teams the young can pursue puzzling problems. Their associations in the task can reflect the changing memberships of the community itself. The shared world of the community presents many opportunities for temporal insight. Even conversations with the elderly or care for the young can help adolescents place themselves within the cycle of human life.

Indistinctly at first and then with increasing clarity, we become conscious of who we are and our place in the world. Our sensing reflects a universal shared sensibility. Our perceptions reveal subjectivity in general. Schmidt in analyzing Merleau-Ponty's thought contends:

> The ultimate consciousness is not an eternal subject perceiving itself in absolute transparancy--it rather is a comprehensive project or a view of time and the world which needs to unfold itself into multiplicity . . . the social is a living relationship and tension among individuals.[17]

An awareness of the subject's embeddedness in culture and history and of a bond with others encourages a sensitivity to and appreciation of others. Rabil describes the unifying sense of intersubjectivity: "Despite the multiplicity of perspectives which men have in the world . . . there is a discernible human unity."[18]

Ambiguity/Contingency

But it is a shared world pervaded with ambiguity and contingency. "The fundamental contingency of our lives makes us feel like strangers at the trial."[19] This is a thought constantly repeated in Merleau-Ponty's writings. Teachers responsive to the conceptual caution run counter to many in society who seek scientifically determined explanations for human conduct or those who are convinced everything is part of a master plan working its way to a predestined end. Textbooks and the media both suggest neat solutions and precise quantifications of world

problems and individual dilemmas. Even teaching itself is often characterized in workshops as five-step-no-fail-recipe following. Awakening the young to the enigmas of life and the unpredictable intertwining of unforeseen events can be unsettling for some learners, old or young. To attempt to really see or feel an event or to hear another without preconception can be difficult. What seems obvious now becomes riddled with the surprising and the enigmatic. To begin to focus on person or object opens one to the specialness of seeing the seemingly familiar for the first time. To interpret a message by listening to the silences in between the words and to translate the gesture of another can be revelatory and disquieting. Poetry and art are obvious channels to apprise the ambiguity of a message. Interpreting varied accounts of events, contemporary or historic, present both the contingent and the ambiguous to the alert learner. Even one's autobiography can illustrate both concepts in a personal way.

On the other hand, ambiguity and contingency are oppressively present in some lives. Dialogue with teacher, book, or artistic presentation can reveal the presence of both concepts in human life. One feels less disconnected if others share similar perceptions and feelings. Power and potential as well as challenge and confrontation mingle in the shared world of human enterprise.

Freedom

In relating to both ambiguity and the contingency of life with resourcefulness and poise, one demonstrates the life style of a free

individual. The person is aware of restrictions but neither overly dependent nor always defiant of social and cultural conditions. The one remains the one who is unique but responsive to and connected to others.

Freedom energizes the intersubjective world. With it one can carve out one's own existence and relate as equal partner to the other. The use of freedom does not necessarily ease one's burdens nor guarantee success. Rather, it is a dynamic power that enlivens the self's action in a shared social situation. The world remains a challenge but not a wall that cannot be scaled.

> Facing freedom, existence unveils a wholly new face of the world--the world as a promise and threat to it, the world which sets traps for, seduces, or gives into it; a landscape full of routes and roadblocks; in short, the world 'we exist'.[20]

Merleau-Ponty describes the human condition. It reflects the vagaries of lived experience. Within the learning as well as the social and political situation, the self recognizes the other as partner in the adventure of life and others linked to one in an intersubjective experience. The free individual considers, chooses, and acts. Educators whose goal is intersubjective awareness provide many options in the learning situation. Through choices the self structures a life plan and impacts that of the other. Balancing responsibility with initiative, learners discover how their projects mix and intermingle with those of others. An ever widening learning experience introduces the self to freedom's force and attraction in past and present events, both global and national. Recognizing that freedom denied to one is a limit to all,

maturing learners will be empathic to those who, denied freedom, suffer in the struggle. Responding to the interconnectedness between the self and others, learners will echo Merleau-Ponty's sentiments. Our hope in a world of conflict and chaos is man himself, the hero.

> The man who is still alive has only one resource but a sovereign one: he must keep on acting like a living man. We die alone, but we live with other people; we are the image which they have of us: where they are, we are too . . . . Today's hero is not skeptical, dilettantish, or decadent; he has simply experienced chance, disorder, and failure . . . he has a sharper sense of human liberty and of the contingency of the future than anyone has ever had before. Taking everything into account, nothing is certain. The contemporary hero is not Lucifer; he is not even Prometheus; he is man.[21]

Who is the hero is a continuing question for old and young alike. Teacher and pupil in a dialogic relation ponder that issue. Drawing on sources from news release to historic data, they can tender their own descriptions and criteria for judging the hero. Some of their sharings would describe the heroic figure as a person, not a paragon, and one who celebrated his/her individuality with regard for the dignity of others.

Summary/Conclusions

A Merleau-Ponty influenced teaching style relates to the learner as interrogator to the world. The educator seeks to heighten awareness of the shared world of nature, society, and that of self. An intersubjec-

tive relationship with others is encouraged. Yet, the individuality of the self cannot be overlooked. There is an acceptance of uniqueness of each and the multiplicity of perspectives in any situation. Involvement, multi-leveled learning, and dialogue are important aspects in the educational scenario. Planning and organization would be paired with the acceptance of contingency and ambiguity in one's existence whether it be career, educational, social relationships, or political reform. Each learner would be encouraged to be his/her own self and to recognize that local as well as global problems are solved by engaged individuals, not faceless members of the crowd. Importantly, learners should be encouraged to perceive person, object, and event as it really is, including its connectedness to the natural and social world. Involvement in the culture and membership in institutions are recognized as fact. Also understood is the importance of each individual who can and should make a difference in the functioning of both society and culture. Neither system nor authority figure provides the solution to our dilemmas; only humans interconnected responsibly but undogmatically to shared goals have the potential.

Functioning within this style of teaching, the educator believes in the young, is hopeful for the future, but is also aware and copes with the ambiguity, contingency, and absurdity that pervade much of contemporary life, including many educational institutions. Within the context of the particular institutional situation, the educator works as an agent for intersubjective awareness.

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